



IPTA Position Paper

Passenger Lap Shoulder Seat Belts in School Buses

February 4, 2019

The Iowa Pupil Transportation Association (IPTA) was established in 1963. The membership represents community school districts in almost all 99 counties in the State of Iowa. The mission of the Iowa Pupil Transportation Association is to serve as a resource for school administrators, supervisors, mechanics, drivers and the Iowa Department of Education in the upgrading of Iowa's pupil transportation program. For the past 56 years the IPTA has continued to forge strong relationships with local, state and federal governing bodies, policy makers, and our partners in the education community. The IPTA's primary goals are to provide information and assistance to school transportation departments to help them maintain an effective and efficient transportation operation, and to keep children's safety first!

The installation and use of passenger lap-shoulder belts in Iowa school buses has been a controversial issue for almost 40 years. The IPTA has studied this issue and has concluded that Iowa's children would be safer if school buses included lap-shoulder seat belts as standard equipment.

Safety experts agree that school buses are the safest way to transport students. According to the National Association for Pupil Transportation (NAPT), approximately 485,000 school buses carry more than 25 million children to and from school and related activities in the United States every day. Accident statistics demonstrate that riding a school bus is much safer than riding in a personal car. However, this does not mean that school buses could not be made much safer. There are children injured in school bus crashes every year.

Over the years, national and state groups have been cautious about committing their support for mandatory seat belt laws for school buses. In the past 15 years, due to improved seat belt technology and reduced cost, most organizations strongly recommend lap-shoulder seat belts as standard equipment on all new buses. In 2015, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the agency responsible for writing vehicle safety rules, announced that it was launching a nationwide effort to install lap-shoulder seat belts in school buses. NHTSA stated, "Every child on every school bus should have a three-point seat belt."

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit research group funded by auto insurance companies, favors putting three-point seat belts on school buses. In February 2014, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) wrote a position paper recommending the installation of lap-shoulder seat belts in school buses nationwide, with the purpose to provide guidance and assistance to professionals and policy makers charged with making that significant decision. The National Safety Council has supported personal restraint use for decades, and continues to be adamant about making them standard equipment on school buses. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) have also recommended lap-shoulder seat belts on every new school bus for many years.

"Serving Iowa Pupil Transportation Programs Since 1963"

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The arguments against requiring lap-shoulder seat belts in school buses over the years have focused on the following: (1) the safety of compartmentalization and (2) cost.

It has been commonly accepted for many years that compartmentalization, which is closely spaced, impact-absorbing, high-back, padded seats for riders, has been one of the fundamental elements in the safety design for school buses. Compartmentalization offers protection in frontal and in rear crashes assuming all children are properly seated. It offers only limited protection, however, in rollover and side impact crashes. During a rollover or a side impact event, students are tossed about the interior of the bus like clothes in a dryer. They strike other students, seats, windows, and even the ceiling. When passengers are restrained by lap-shoulder seat belts, they are more likely to be properly seated during all types of crashes, and will remain seated in the seating compartment during rollovers or side impacts, thus minimizing injury.

The cost for making lap-shoulder seat belts standard equipment on school buses is a factor. However, lap-shoulder seat belts have become more affordable in this past decade. Ten years ago the cost was approximately \$15,000 to equip a 65 passenger school bus. In today's market, the cost is approximately \$7,500. It is no longer prohibitively expensive considering the overall cost of the bus and the average life of the vehicle. When considering lap-shoulder seat belts or other safety measures, the State of Iowa and local school districts must prioritize available funding to provide the greatest safety for all students. The \$7,500 cost to equip a school bus with lap-shoulder belts can be calculated by taking the total cost divided by the average life span of a bus (15 years), divided by the number of passengers (65), and the number of school days per year (180). This results in a little over 4 cents per passenger per day for this added student safety.

California, Florida, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, Nevada and Texas have laws requiring passenger lap seat belts or lap-shoulder seat belts on school buses. Over the last 2 years, more than 18 school districts in Iowa are voluntarily installing lap-shoulder seat belts on all new buses purchased. A list of these school districts is available upon request at the IPTA office.

School districts using lap-shoulder seat belt equipped school buses with a mandatory usage policies report noticeable improvements in student behavior and a reduction in behavior incident bus referrals. The use of lap-shoulder seat belts creates an environment that has less potential for student-to-student bullying and harassment and significantly reduces driver distraction. Equipping Iowa school buses with lap-shoulder seat belts is a safety feature that can significantly reduce minor and serious injuries. If a child has the additional protection of a lap-shoulder seat belt, they are far less likely to be seriously injured. Seat belts help in evacuations, as uninjured children can evacuate much more quickly than an injured or an unconscious child.

(Iowa Code 321.445 - Safety Belts and Safety Harness – Use required) Seat belt installation in personal cars has been required in Iowa since 1966, and in 1986 seat belts were required to be used. Currently all states require children in the back seat of a personal car to be restrained by a car seat or a seat belt. School bus usage of seat belts has lagged behind.

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The Iowa Pupil Transportation Association recommends that the State of Iowa equip school buses with lap-shoulder seat belts, issue a mandatory use policy, and require training on proper seat belt usage along with proper evacuation training. Districts have zero tolerance policies for fighting and bullying. This zero tolerance philosophy should apply to the use and wearing of seat belts on the bus. If a student does not use the lap-shoulder seat belt, then they should lose their bus riding privileges.

IPTA Position Statement

On January 16, 2019, the IPTA Board of Directors unanimously voted to recommend that lap-shoulder seat belts should be added as standard equipment on all new school buses purchased in Iowa. With the understanding that along with this requirement, there needs to be guidance for Iowa school districts and legislators when considering the requirements for the installation of lap-shoulder seat belts in school buses. The rules that guide us should encompass:

- Require lap-shoulder seat belts as standard equipment on all new Iowa school buses,
- A usage policy for school buses equipped with passenger lap-shoulder seat belts,
- A training program for proper usage and adjustment of passenger lap-shoulder seat belts, and
- A training program for lap-shoulder seat belt emergency evacuation.

This association has a primary leadership obligation in issues relating to our members, the public, school staff, and students in regard to safety. Iowa school districts have begun to put lap-shoulder seat belts on school buses in several communities. We believe this clearly shows a proactive safety consideration, and that it is time to reconsider and promote lap-shoulder seat belts as standard equipment on all new Iowa school buses.

Summary

The Iowa Pupil Transportation Association fully supports and recommends that lap-shoulder seat belts should be added as standard equipment on all new school buses purchased in Iowa. Properly seated students are a huge factor for the more than **9,000** school bus drivers transporting approximately **243,283** students on Iowa's school buses every day. Student discipline and student management could be improved significantly with the installation of lap-shoulder seat belts. Should the State of Iowa or a local school district decide to equip their school buses with lap-shoulder seat belts, IPTA believes that a mandatory usage policy should also be in place with necessary training on the importance of wearing and proper usage of the seat belts along with proper evacuation training.

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